

Gretchen Scronce. Goals and Achievement in the Community Workshops Program: A Study of Participants. A Master's Paper for the M.S. in L.S degree. August, 2006. 37 pages. Advisor: Lisa Norberg

This study describes a survey and interviews conducted with participants in the Community Workshops Program, a series of free computer classes offered by UNC-Chapel Hill University Libraries in Chapel Hill and Carrboro public libraries. The study was conducted to learn more about participants and their reasons for attending computer classes in order to assess the effectiveness of the program.

The Community Workshops Program has proven to be popular and has achieved many successes in its initial format. Participants in the workshops tend to be older adults with computers in their household who want to learn broad computer skills for a variety of reasons. Prior computer experience among students varies. Most participants are satisfied with the classes. Participating libraries and program organizers may consider the findings as they assess their own goals for the program.

Headings:

Programmed instruction

Library extension/College and university libraries

Use studies/Library extension

Internet/Public libraries

Microcomputers/Patron use

Online searching/Teaching

GOALS AND ACHIEVEMENT IN THE COMMUNITY WORKSHOPS PROGRAM:
A STUDY OF PARTICIPANTS

by
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INTRODUCTION

During spring semester 2005, the University Libraries at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC-Chapel Hill) teamed up with area public libraries to offer free workshops in computer and online research skills. The classes began at the Chapel Hill Public Library in the spring, and expanded to the Carrboro Branch Library and the Carrboro Cybrary during the summer of 2005. Volunteer librarians and library students from UNC-Chapel Hill teach the courses. Topics range from beginner-level Computer Basics to more advanced Internet research classes on such topics as genealogy, business and living wills. Some classes are also offered in Spanish.

As the program enters its second year, this study proposes to evaluate the program, including recent changes, to see how well needs are being met. Does participation in the Community Workshops Series help adult learners achieve their computer and information literacy-related goals? Many courses, especially introductory ones, are extremely popular. A number of participants become repeat students and attend every class they are able. This enthusiasm indicates some level of success—students seemingly would not be so enthusiastic if they were not improving their computer skills. Still, an answer to this question may indicate changes in curriculum or program structure that would help the program to better address the specific goals and skills acquisition of students. It could also provide more concrete evidence of success for the libraries involved.

BACKGROUND

The Community Workshops were designed after a graduate student at UNC's School of Information and Library Science who served as a board member of the Chapel Hill Public Library approached the University Library's Coordinator of Instructional Services. The student proposed a collaboration that would tap into the resources at the university to provide computer instruction for public library users. It has proved to be an ideal match-up in many ways. While some classes are taught by professional librarians from UNC libraries, the program could not function as fully as it does without graduate students from the School of Information and Library Science, who receive valuable hands-on library instruction experience when they volunteer to teach the classes. So far, SILS students have also taken primary responsibility for much of the day-to-day administration of the program as well.

Classes began at the Chapel Hill Public Library in March of 2005, and were added at the Carrboro Branch Library in June and the Carrboro Cybrary in July. While curriculum and class structure are similar at all three libraries, the libraries and computer labs are physically very different. Class times and frequency also varies at each library.

Chapel Hill Public Library is a large free-standing municipal library, with a 22-station PC computer lab and large projector screen installed at the front of the lab. Open seven days a week, it is the largest and most heavily used library in Orange County. Classes are held at Chapel Hill Public Library on Wednesdays, Thursdays and Fridays from 8:30-9:30 a.m., before the library opens at 10:00.

The Carrboro Branch Library, a branch of the Orange County Public Library system, shares space with the school library media center within McDougle Middle School in Carrboro, and its computer lab consists of a group of Macintosh desktops and 4

PCs. Currently classes are taught only on PCs and are generally limited to 4 participants, although 2 laptops are available for use if needed. There is no projection screen. Classes are held on Saturday mornings from 9:00-10:00, and the library itself opens at 10:00.

The Carrboro Cybrary, which opened in fall 2004, is a small public library branch located within the Century Center, a municipal building in downtown Carrboro that also houses the Police Department and Parks and Recreation. Like the Carrboro Branch Library, it is part of the Orange County Public Library system. There are five PCs in the Cybrary, as well as a moveable projection screen that can be connected to a laptop—it is sometimes used for the computer classes. In addition to the desktop machines, the Cybrary will also register several participants for each session who want to bring their own laptop. Cybrary classes are on Wednesday evenings from 7:00-8:00 (the Cybrary closes to the general public at 5:00 on weekdays). Initially, classes were also offered on Sundays from 2:30-3:30, but these were dropped in fall 2005 due to lack of attendance.

Each library keeps a sign-up sheet for the classes at the reference or reference/circulation desk, and patrons register for the classes in advance at the library. Online registration is also possible at the Community Workshops website, which is located on the UNC Libraries site. In addition to registration, the website contains a schedule and other basic information, descriptions of all the courses offered, and the recent addition of an online Web Basics tutorial designed to supplement the Web Basics classes.

While participant response to the classes has been overwhelmingly positive, attendance remains uncertain for some classes. Registration for most basics classes fills up and most have waiting lists, often well in advance of the class date, but it is not

unusual to have empty seats for classes that had waiting lists, especially in the larger lab at Chapel Hill Public Library. None of the Chapel Hill classes surveyed for this paper were full, despite several full registration lists.

For the first year of the program, classes were one session only. This year some classes have been offered in a 3-class sequence, with the same participants attending all three sessions. These sequences have occurred at Chapel Hill Public Library and Carrboro Branch Library. At Chapel Hill Public Library, the series lasts one week, with class on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday. At Carrboro Branch Library, the series takes three weeks to complete, with one class each Saturday. Classes offered in series during spring 2006 included PowerPoint, Email, Getting Crafty, and Web Basics.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Information Literacy

The literature on information literacy offers various conceptual models through which to approach the skills of locating, evaluating and managing information (definition from Gibson 2004). Gibson discusses the need to expand the concept, citing Australian researcher Christine Bruce's seven facets of experiencing information: seeing, handling, feeling, knowing, acting upon and using (Gibson). Mani (2004) dislikes the term altogether, because it creates a positive/negative dichotomy in which to classify patrons. Rather than label individuals information literate or illiterate, she prefers to describe individuals as having varying levels of information fluency, a term that implies upward movement and possibilities for growth as well as avoids labeling those with poor skills as "illiterate."

On the other hand, Grassian (2004) believes the distinction between “old” bibliographic instruction and “new” information literacy is overblown, and librarians need to simply expand the kinds of instruction they’ve been doing all along to include the wider array of resources represented in the concept of information literacy.

Schaefer (2004) links information literacy to the more traditional literacy skills of reading and writing, stating “in order for users to be literate in the twenty-first century, they must also be technologically savvy” (19). Incorporating computer-based training into literacy programs not only improves results for many learners, but also strengthens their information technology literacy at the same time. Quigley (2003) similarly emphasizes a need for public libraries to become more visible electronically in literacy efforts. He advocates linking to literacy information and resources throughout library websites to provide easy access to information for patrons and to promote the library’s role in literacy education.

St. Lifer (2005) questions the role librarians are playing in current discussions on information literacy competencies within the field of education and educational testing. Despite the influence of standards developed by the American Association of School Librarians, library groups are noticeably absent from current partnerships.

Britz (2004) discusses information poverty, the social problem resulting from a lack of access to information and communication technologies combined with a lack of information literacy skills. Although his discussion is centered around individuals and communities in the developing world, the same problems can be observed among certain populations in relatively wealthy communities in the United States, and his discussion of the problems resulting from information poverty remains relevant in a different context.

Library Instruction

A discussion of web-based instruction outreach to remote patrons can be found in Wilson (2003). Examples include offering virtual tours and online orientations to the library as well as online tutorials on searching and other information literacy concepts.

Some articles offer advice to improve teaching effectiveness. Akers (2004) offers suggestions for discovering a personal style of teaching developed through practice, observation and reflection. Masek (2000) specifically addresses how to teach hands-on computer classes in a way that helps adults learn and retain skills.

Within the literature on library information literacy education there is specific literature about collaborative projects. A majority of these collaborations seem targeted at enhancing the information literacy of K-12 students by exposing them to public and university libraries, with guidance provided by public and academic librarians. Nutefall (2001) discusses one such grant-funded program in Rochester, New York, and describes how the libraries involved guidelines for the collaborations based on agreed-upon information literacy objectives. Additionally, the project provided clear networking support for librarians interested in partnering with other librarians.

The ALA and ACRL websites lead to information about many more collaborative projects, as a result of ACRL's Community Partnerships Initiative, instituted in 2001. Some pages have not been well-maintained, but the site describes potential benefits of partnering to provide information literacy instruction to a community as well as points to many examples. Again, the vast majority of projects involve K-12 students as the direct beneficiaries.

Adult Learning

Adult students are often significantly different from secondary and college students. Motivation for learning may be different and based more heavily on life experiences than it was at a younger age. Adults are more likely to have actively chosen to be in a learning environment, and they may be more invested in the learning process as a result of their decision. Some may learn slowly, especially when computers are involved. Older adults in particular may be extremely unfamiliar with the computer, and physical and visual impairments may pose added challenges for some learners. There is a great deal of literature on adults and learning that addresses these differences.

McCook and Barber (2002) approach the subject of adult learning from a policy standpoint, making the case that attitude towards adult education in general has been heavily shaped in recent years by linkages between funding for adult basic education and work-preparedness programs designed to quickly move adults away from public assistance and into jobs. This is sometimes in direct contrast to the approach of many librarians that education and reading can have transformational and lifelong value. They also discuss the absence of adult education courses and training in current LIS programs.

In addition to theoretical and policy-based literature, case studies provide examples of successful computer training for older adults. Stephenson's (2002) study of learners age 50 and above in the UK reveals that older adults wanted to learn about computers, whereas younger learners wanted to learn about using computers and developing skills. The study also looked at where people became frustrated and found that those who gave up did so not simply because they became frustrated, but only when they were unable to overcome their frustration.

A librarian from Vigo County Public Library in Terre Haute, Indiana, describes the development and evolution of her library's program of free computer classes for seniors (Holba Puacz 2000). The library found success with a multiple class format, in which computer and non-computer sessions were mixed. The hands-on computer sessions were designed for smaller groups than the non-computer presentations, and they quickly followed the presentations in order to reinforce what had been taught.

METHODOLOGY

Research consisted of two parts: a written survey that participants were asked to complete immediately following classes, and a telephone interview conducted with a smaller number of participants, at times ranging from several weeks to several months following participation in class.

The survey was administered to nine classes in March of 2006. Classes surveyed at Chapel Hill Public Library were: PowerPoint, Health Information for Seniors, Gardening on the Web, and Email. At Carrboro Branch Library, two classes in the Web Basics series were surveyed—Web Basics I, and then two weeks later at Web Basics III. Three classes were surveyed at the Carrboro Cybrary: Web Basics II, Computer Basics, and Computer Basics: Microsoft Word.

The researcher attended all classes that were surveyed, in most cases assisting with the class as a floater, and personally administered the survey. In addition, the researcher attended several classes that were not surveyed, primarily due to lack of time. Personal observations from all classes attended contributed to analysis of the survey and interview data.

All participants were invited to take the survey at the end of class—normally about ten minutes was reserved to allow time for this. The researcher described the study and the request for participation, and answered any questions, all in accordance with the guidelines of the Institutional Review Board. Each participant taking the survey read and signed a consent form. The consent form included a space for participants to provide a phone number if they were willing to be contacted for a follow-up telephone interview.

The survey (see Appendix II) consisted of 14 questions and took most participants under 10 minutes to complete, including the time it took to read the instructions and consent form. Questions were primarily multiple-choice. The few open-ended questions on the survey could be answered with a number or brief comment. Most completed the entire survey, and did not seem to have trouble with either the instructions or the questions. Occasionally a question was left blank, and several surveys were returned with an entire page of questions overlooked.

Response rates were high, well over fifty percent, for several reasons. Participants normally complete an evaluation form at the end of each class, so many people were already accustomed to this practice. In this case, the questionnaire for this study was simply substituted for the normal evaluation form, along with the consent form and a brief explanation by the researcher. Additionally, enthusiasm for the computer classes adds a level of interest and willingness to help, which was a tremendous advantage when asking people for their time. Over two-thirds of participants who completed the study also provided their phone numbers, thereby volunteering for the telephone interview.

The workshops attract a number of participants who attend many classes. Some of these individuals declined to repeat the study once they had taken it, but several people completed the survey twice. No one took the survey more than twice. Multiple responses were included in analysis.

Initially, surveying at each day of series classes seemed to be a good way to compare progress made in series classes to that of single classes. This consecutive surveying was not done, however. Participants at the Chapel Hill Public Library were confused when asked to complete a survey they had just taken the day before. The one exception was the Web Basics series at the Carrboro Branch Library. This series was surveyed on the first and last days, but there were two weeks separating the classes, and only one participant completed the survey after the first class.

The second phase of research consisted of telephone interviews. Because of the large number of respondents who provided their phone numbers, it was not possible to speak with everyone. Phone candidates were selected from the pool based on their written survey, to include a mixture of ages, employment status, and computer experience.

The researcher called the individuals to be interviewed, reminded them of the survey and asked if they were still willing to participate. In some cases the interview took place immediately, and in other cases a time was arranged for the researcher to call back.

The phone interview consisted of 25-30 open-ended questions. The interviews lasted between 15 minutes and half an hour. Most participants spoke very freely about

their computer experience, their experience with the workshops, and their reasons for using computers.

ANALYSIS

In-Class Surveys

When studied collectively, the surveys reveal several demographic trends among Community Workshops participants, as well as ways in which the group is very diverse. Looking further at individual libraries, there are some slight differences among the three groups. These differences may be useful for future planning and will be discussed, but because the program is currently planned and administered without much distinction, the group will be primarily studied as a whole.

Because classes are held more frequently at Chapel Hill and because these classes are larger, more participants were surveyed here. The smaller numbers at Carrboro Branch Library and the Cybrary mean that these surveys may be less representative of all participants at these libraries. This is particularly true at Carrboro Branch Library, where only two classes, both part of the Web Basics Series, were surveyed, resulting in only 5 surveys.

There were a number of skipped questions and a few skipped pages on completed surveys. Additionally, there were several instances of a respondent selecting multiple answers to a single-answer question. In these cases, the total number was based on the total number of usable answers, not the total number of surveys.

One trend obvious to anyone observing the classes is that participants tend to be older adults. About half reported being over 60 years of age. The largest age group is 61-70. With 13 individuals in this age range, this group is nearly twice the size of the next

largest age groups. Seven each are in their 40s and 50s. There are fewer participants on either end, with 3 in the 31-40 and 5 above 70. There were no respondents under the age of 30.¹

The tendency for participants to be older makes sense for a couple of reasons. Older Americans are the group of people least likely to have received computer training elsewhere, namely in school or in the workplace. They are also the least likely group to be at work on weekday mornings, when classes are held at Chapel Hill Public Library. These are the most frequent and largest classes, accounting for the greatest percentage of participants.

Employment status is a factor related to age. Participants were asked to select the statement that best described their employment status. Predictably, the largest number, 17 respondents, selected “I am retired.” Those with a job made up the next largest group, with 10 people. Three more have a job but are looking for a new one. Five are looking for a job, and two are not employed and are not seeking employment.

There was not a strict age break-down between Chapel Hill Public Library and the two Carrboro libraries, who both offered classes at times outside of a regular 9-5 work schedule. There were participants over 70 in the Carrboro classes, and two of the three participants in their thirties attended class at Chapel Hill Public Library. However, the participants in Carrboro were much less likely to be retired. At the Cybrary, 6 of 9 respondents selected a status other than “retired”, as did 3 of 5 at Carrboro Branch Library. At Chapel Hill Public Library the trend is reversed—there were 13 retirees and 7 non-retirees.

Also related to age is the type of computer experience reported by participants. When asked to select the statement that best described previous experience, 15, or nearly half, chose “I taught myself how to do some things on a computer.” About the same number (14) selected “I had some computer training outside of school,” while only 5 had received any training in school. The remaining 5 reported having no experience with computers. These numbers would change drastically if the age range had dipped below 30.

Another major trend is computer ownership. 30 out of 35 respondents, or 86%, reported owning a computer. This is far higher than the national rate of 62% (p. 1) and the North Carolina rate of 58% (Table 1B) for the presence of a computer in the household (Current Population Survey Report 2003). The majority of respondents who have a computer (25 people) use a desktop machine. Six reported using a laptop in their home. Computer ownership was high across all branches—all 5 respondents at the Carrboro Branch Library owned a computer, but this is a small number of surveys, and further research would probably bring this percentage closer to the other libraries.

Participants were asked to select all the places they use computers, from the following choices: home desktop computer; home laptop computer; relative or friend’s house; work; the library; not at all; and other (to be filled in by respondent). After home desktop computer, the library was the second most popular place to use a computer. Nine respondents reported using computers at the library. Six use computers at work (out of 13 who have jobs). Only 1 used the computer at a friend/relative’s house.

The result that only 9 out of 35 participants surveyed use computers at the library could be interpreted in different ways. Assuming most respondents read through the

entire list and did not just select home computer and move on, the program is primarily reaching individuals who do not use the libraries' computing facilities independently of the classes. The high level of computer ownership supports the finding that most people use their own computers and do not need the library's computing resources. It also makes sense that computer owners, especially new owners, would be invested in improving their computer skills, perhaps more than non-owners, who may be more likely to use the library's computer lab.

If the libraries are trying to provide computer instruction in response to perceived needs among their existing computer users, the program is succeeding only partially at reaching out to these users. However, the program is successful at introducing new users to the library's computer resources. Whether these users return to the library on their own or not, they walk out the door with a generally favorable impression of the technological resources and support offered by the library. The survey did not ask participants if/how they used the library in addition to the classes, so it remains unclear whether participants tend to be active library patrons who use the print collections and other non-computer resources.

Almost all participants use computers on a regular basis—most reported using one several times a week. The survey asked participants to report the number of days they used a computer in the week prior to their class. Only 3 reported no computer use in the previous week. Eleven used a computer once or twice, and 12 used a computer 3-5 times in the previous week. Nine people, a sizeable group, used a computer 6 or 7 days.

Previous experience with computers varies greatly. The survey asked simply, "How long have you been using computers?" without specifying any particular type of

computer use. Eight respondents had been using computers for one year or less at the time of the survey. Two specifically said they had started with the library classes. The remainder were scattered across a wide range from 2 years to 30 years, for one participant. Of those who gave concrete numbers (a few only said “years”), 8 people, the same as the number of beginners, reported using computers for more than 10 years. In some cases, it was apparent from a survey response that the participant had used a much older type of computer and had very little familiarity with modern Windows, mouse-based PCs and/or software.

Participant experience also varied greatly with regard to the workshop series. Eleven respondents, or about a third, were first-time attendees of a class when they took the study. Five were in the 10-12 class range, eight had attended 5-9 classes, seven had attended 2-4 classes, and three others said they had attended “many” classes. One participant has attended “most all the computer classes since starting.”

In addition to years of experience, one question asked participants about specific activities and software they had used. Options were: email; World Wide Web (Internet); word processing (Microsoft Word); spreadsheets (Microsoft Excel); and photo editing (such as Photoshop). There was also an option to write in an additional item.

Internet-based uses were the most common—27 participants had used email, along with 24 who had used the Web. Word processing was the next most common application, with 21 participants having some prior experience. There was a very large gap between the common trio of email, Web and word processing and the lesser-used applications on the list. Seven participants had used spreadsheets before, five had done some kind of photo-editing, and one mentioned PowerPoint in the “Other” field.

The next question on the survey used the same list of applications, but asked participants to select the ones they wanted to know more about. There is much less of a gap among these answers. The two Microsoft Office programs—Word and Excel—tied for most desirable, with twenty participants selecting each. Email and the Web tied for second, with 19 responses each. Photo editing was a close third with 17 responses.

There were more write-in answers for this question than for any other. Four people wanted to know about “everything.” Two wanted to learn PowerPoint (a very logical write-in—it was not a given choice but one of the classes surveyed was about PowerPoint), and one specifically wanted to know how to attach a photo to an email.

Comparing participants’ experience with what they would like to know more about reveals that they want to learn about programs they know very little about currently, but they also want to become more knowledgeable about things they already do on the computer.

Two questions on the survey dealt with individual goals for the classes. One was open-ended: “What were your goals for this class?” The other asked respondents to select reasons for attending the class from a list of eight. They were instructed to choose all that applied, and there was an additional space for a write-in reason.

Many participants described very general goals for the first question. Some examples of this: “Learn all I can;” “learn computer functions;” “simply more knowledge.” Many more listed goals that were in line with the class they took, but still fairly general, e.g. “to get a better understanding of Microsoft Word” for a Word Basics participant; “to use the Webb [sic] more effectively” from a Web Basics student; “to learn how to use E-mail” from a person attending the Email class.

Others articulated more specific goals, usually without using the terminology that a more computer-savvy person might have used. A woman in the Health Information for Seniors class said her goals was to “manage my own health.” This is in some ways a very specific desire, but at the same time it could be interpreted any number of ways, even if limited to ways the computer could be involved. Another simple, direct goal from a Computer Basics participant: “To become comfortable with turning on the computer & using it without fear of doing something wrong.”

Some participants had very forward-looking goals that included skills the class they were attending did not directly address. These ranged from general to specific, and often had several components: “To be able to be good on a computer so I can do many things with it, especially write a book, do cards & take pictures out;” “To learn the basics about computers & to be able to use the Internet. I have never e-mailed either before;” “Learning how to cut, paste, format advertisements (letters); Also creating website.”

This open-ended question was followed by one that asked participants to select from a list their reasons for attending class. The list included more general reasons (e.g. “General curiosity about computers and the Internet”) as well as more specific ones (e.g. “To learn how to use email”; “To learn how to fix problems with my computer”). While earlier questions asked about specific programs and uses of the computer, this question was aimed at overall goals and the role that computers play in the participants’ lives. Participants tended to choose multiple responses for this question. As suggested by their open-ended answers to the previous question, these answers further indicate that participants come to the computer classes with broad goals for their own computer use.

Two responses tied for the most popular. Twenty-one people each selected “For communication purposes” and “To search the Internet for information” as a reason for attending class. Although “communication purposes” would include writing letters or creating cards in Microsoft Word or sharing information through a PowerPoint slide, clearly using the Internet to connect to and receive information from the outside world is important to Community Workshops participants.

The importance of Internet activities is the one strong pattern to emerge from these choices. “To learn how to use email”, the third Internet-related option (selected by 16 participants), is separated from the first two only by “Improve technology skills,” with 19 participants.

The other responses were each selected by a sizeable number of people. “Improve computer skills for my job” closely followed Email (15 people), although “To help me get a job” was the least frequently selected response, with only 9 people choosing it. “To learn how to fix problems with my computer” and “General curiosity about computers and the Internet” were chosen 13 and 12 times, respectively—enough to count as significant reasons but not overwhelmingly popular.

One question on the survey received the same answer from every respondent. When asked if they intended to practice the computer skills learned in the workshop, not a single person marked No. This indicates the question is most likely unreliable, despite that the study reveals a group of people who are actively using computers and probably acquiring and practicing new skills on a regular basis. Participants who have taken time out of their day to attend a computer class are unlikely to say that they do not intend to practice or somehow use what they have learned.

The researcher was interested in whether or how people might be using the computer classes to build their job skills. It was suspected that the classes might be attractive to people who are seeking work or looking for a better job, because they are free and teach very basic, practical computer skills. Many of the respondents who were employed or job-seeking indicated that improving computer skills for a current or future job was a reason for attending the class, but the high percentage of retirees among the group makes this a less significant function of the program than it might be otherwise. Only 8 of those surveyed—22%—said they were looking for a job, including those who have a job but are looking for a new one. Nine selected “To help me get a job” as one of their reasons for attending class—these were mostly, but not always, the same people who said they were looking for a job.

Fifteen participants selected “Improve computer skills for my job” as a reason for attending the class. This number is almost as high as the combined number of people who are either employed, looking for a job, or employed and looking for a new job. This indicates that many people who have or are considering employment see the class as contributing somehow to their employability, even if they did not also select “To help me get a job” as a direct reason for attending a class.

All three participants who said they had a job but were looking for a new one chose “To improve computer skills for my job” as a reason for attending class. Two of the three additionally selected “To help me get a job” as a reason.

Telephone Interviews

Telephone interviews were conducted with four participants to obtain a deeper understanding of some individuals’ experience with computers and the Community

Workshops. In particular, the interviews provided an opportunity to ask participants about their computer use at some point following the class at which they were surveyed. Although the four people do not necessarily represent Community Workshops participants as a whole, information obtained through the phone interviews generally reinforces the survey results and personal observations.

Three of the interviewees attended class at the Chapel Hill Public Library. One participant from the Carrboro Cybrary was also interviewed. The Chapel Hill participants were all interviewed 2-3 weeks following their class—they were all attending the PowerPoint series. The Cybrary participant was interviewed about 5 months after her Computer Basics class.

Alice² is a retired woman around age 64-65. She attends Community Workshops classes with her husband at the Chapel Hill Public Library. They attend every class they can—usually they attend class and then continue on to their health spa, which is nearby. The efficiency of making this single trip, and also the fact that the classes are free, are important to her. She is very enthusiastic about the classes, and this carried over on the phone. The interview lasted over half an hour—by far the longest—and she talked about wanting to help in any way she can.

Alice is a fairly new computer user. She and her husband got a computer in December of 2005, and started attending classes the same month. They have DSL Internet through BellSouth. She described herself as a very motivated person, who wants to write a book and who used to write a column for the Chapel Hill News, and these are the reasons she wants to know about computers. She said she is able to do things on the computer but also runs into problems once she opens a program. When this happens and

she gets stuck, she just goes to do something else. She often described what she has learned in class without using the standard vocabulary—"I learned how to put the red thing in the box" equates to learning about inserting a floppy disk. Alice enjoys the creative aspects of using the computer—she mentioned making Christmas cards in one class. She is very interested in using her computer for writing, although she still seems to be writing things by hand. She wants to learn more about email (she has a BellSouth email account). When asked for feedback on the classes, she mostly seemed to want more help: she thought each class should have 3 "students" (floaters); and she said "I wish I had someone I could call and ask when I got stuck."

Sandra also attends classes at the Chapel Hill Public Library. She sounds young and energetic on the phone, and her answers were short and to the point. She is in her forties and has been using computers for 6 years. By now she seems very comfortable with them, and said it is easy to replicate things at home. She said she didn't run into any problems with it. There are certain aspects she does not know, in particular the Microsoft Office Suite. She attended the library class because she "heard they did it well...word of mouth." She started attending the classes in February and has attended around 9 classes. She especially likes the handouts, and said that she goes home at night (she has a computer and Internet service at home) and works forward, and then asks questions at the next class (She seems to have attended only series classes—Word, Excel and PowerPoint). This also allows her to learn on her own when the pace of the class is a little slow. She said she is eventually looking for a job, and communication skills would be helpful. For Sandra, the most helpful things about the classes are: 1) just having information accessible and being able to use it; 2) paper to take home; 3) an Internet

tutorial the instructor mentioned that was being made³—she seems to find learning tools she can use at her own pace very useful. She said it is interesting that each teacher comes with a different teaching style, and commented that some students keep coming back and some are very basic. The classes seem easy for her, but she did not seem bothered by this, as she remarked that they were intro classes. She explained that she was “not originally from North Carolina” and where she came from people in the basic classes knew how to do things. She described the students here as “needy.”

Frank, the third Chapel Hill participant, wants to learn more about computers because he is in the ministry. A computer user since last fall, he wants to be able to type letters and use email. He began attending classes last fall, when someone told him the library had free classes. Before attending the Community Workshops, Frank had also considered attending a class offered by Durham Tech in Chapel Hill, but he missed the deadline. He estimated he has now attended about 9 Community Workshops classes.

Frank, who is in his forties, said he has used a computer about every other day since his last class. He checks email for the ministry where he works and he also writes letters. Before he started attending the classes, he almost never used computers—he said, “I didn’t know where to begin.” When asked about what he uses from the classes, he produced a long list: he can pull up an Excel page; print documents; type letters; change font; and use Yahoo! email. He has practiced copying and pasting recently, but he has not yet practiced any of the PowerPoint skills he learned in his last class.

Frank described the Basics classes he took at the beginning as the most helpful parts of the Workshops—things like simply learning how to start up and turn off a computer. Once he tried to replicate what he learned on his computer at the ministry, the

hardest part was using a different computer and having to look for things in different places—he said he was fine after he got used to that. Of his overall experience with computers, Frank said, “I thought it was boring...it’s really not boring. It’s amazing what that thing can do.” He also said he wishes classes were all half an hour longer.

Rachel is in her fifties and works in a local restaurant. Her only experience with computers before attending classes at the Cybrary in the spring of 2006 was entering her daily orders at work. She gave several reasons for wanting to learn about computers. She has been considering going back to school, and realized that you have to be able to use a computer even to get a syllabus now, in many cases. Maybe she would even take an online class. She would like to find a job that requires her to be on her feet less, and most ads she sees require some sort of computer use or experience. Additionally, she said, “I just figured it was time—I have not wanted to learn for a long time—I was kind of reactionary about computers.”

The class at the Cybrary was very convenient for Rachel—she saw it in the paper, and it was free and within walking distance from her house. She attended several basics classes in the spring, and learned how to do a number of things—email, finding out information on the Web, “Googling.” Rachel has gone from not using computers at all before the class to using computers at least once or twice a week now. She uses the computer at the Cybrary, mostly for email and Web searching (she always used the term Googling). She hopes to type a resume on the computer very soon, with the help of a friend who knows more about computers.

Rachel seems to have used many of the basic tools she learned in the classes. She said she still doesn’t feel “super confident,” but she is more comfortable than ever before.

She couldn't think of specific problems she has run into, but she pointed out, "That's why the Cybrary is so great, because I can always just ask." Rachel also thought that having her own computer would enable her to practice more than she does now.

The phone interview was the one part of the study that asked participants about series classes, the sets of 3 classes that were offered for the first time in spring 2006. The three at Chapel Hill all spoke positively about having three consecutive days of the same topic. Alice said, "it keeps energy up, [keeps you] learning more." Frank said, "I love it—it gives you more experience, the first time it doesn't really sink in." He appreciated the repetition that this format allows, and said he writes it down the first time, and by the third time he remembers. Likewise, Frank has also attended some of the same classes more than once, explaining that "the more you do it, the more you get to know what you are doing."

Rachel, who attended classes at the Cybrary, was equally positive about the Community Workshops program, but she had a different reaction to the question about series classes. It had been awhile since her classes, which may account partially for her impressions. She thought of the entire series of Community Workshops as her "class", rather than view each instance as a separate class (she attended 2-4 class sessions in the spring). For this reason, she didn't think differently about series and independent classes, and wasn't even sure which type she had attended.

Although Rachel's impression of the entire season as one "class" may be unique, the series classes do function differently at the Carrboro libraries than at Chapel Hill. Because they are spread out with one session each week for 3 weeks rather than 3 consecutive days, participants and instructors lose much of the opportunity to revisit

material very quickly and build upon the fresh knowledge. The series visited by the researcher at Carrboro Branch Library had mostly the same participants for all three weeks, but observation at the Cybrary suggests that the class roster is often very different, even within the series. A number of participants do not sign up for all three sessions.

CONCLUSION

Survey and interview findings depict Community Workshops participants as a group of mostly middle-aged and older adults who are very likely to own their own computers and want to be able to use them fully. Most use computers on a regular basis, and many are new computer users. They especially want to use them for communication—for email, the Web, and word processing, but their interests are also much broader than this. Those who are employed or seeking employment tend to see computer skills as beneficial to their jobs or job searches. Most participants are satisfied with the Community Workshops classes they have taken, as well as with their own skills acquisition.

There may be a relationship between the high number of self-taught participants and their independence at home working with their own computers. The participants who were interviewed seem satisfied with what they are able to do, although they always want to be capable of more. A few participants indicated an initial fear of breaking something, but for the most part they seem comfortable trying things, as well as patient learners. While in class their inexperience is apparent and there is much “handholding” by instructors to get from Point A to Point B, many of the participants are used to learning about computers on their own. They are used to navigating around places where they get stuck.

Furthermore, most are not afraid to ask questions in class. This may be in part related to age and a lack of expectation that they should have certain computer skills already. The tendency to ask lots of questions may be one reason some participants seem “needy”, to use one interviewee’s term. Frequent questions may be interpreted as a lack of self-sufficiency by instructors who are used to working with younger students, who may be less likely to ask questions because of social reasons.

The high rate of computer ownership stands out as a defining characteristic of people who are attracted to the Community Workshops Program, especially considering the number of older participants. This may be something for libraries and program organizers to focus on, because it has implications both in terms of who is attending classes (existing vs. new library user) as well as how participants are using computers and what they need to know about.

As an example of this last point, over a third of respondents selected “To learn how to fix problems with my computer” as one of their reasons for attending a class. The researcher also observed that many participants ask questions relating to their own computers or choosing Internet service. Combined with the high rate of computer ownership, this indicates that classes on computer ownership, setting up home Internet service and being consumers of technology in general might be of interest to many participants. Such classes may draw further from groups of computer owners who do not already use library computer services, but they also might attract library computer users who are considering purchasing computers or Internet services.

Goals and interests indicate that most people who come to the classes aren’t there to learn how to use just one program, but want to become more fluent in all areas of

computer use. A large number of participants attend a variety of classes, rather than attend class/es for just one or two types of applications/activities.

Related to this broad interest is the somewhat lesser interest in very specific topics. For example, only one student attended the Gardening Information on the Web class that was surveyed for this study. These are already offered less frequently than basics classes, but if low attendance is observed for other topical classes, organizers may consider reducing them even further, or offering them in a different format. The handout for the gardening class was quite thorough, with a number of excellent Web links—creating Web-based guides could be considered as an alternative for topical classes that currently attract few students but offer valuable information.

Overall, program organizers and the public libraries involved can be commended for designing a program that is popular and meaningful to participants. The collaborative nature of the project has proven so far to be both efficient and sustaining—overhead costs have been minimal, and involvement with the School of Information and Library Science has provided a ready supply of graduate students interested in gaining instruction experience. This formal study of participants has largely verified the impression that participants are very satisfied with their experiences. At the same time, the opportunity exists for participating libraries and organizers to consider their own goals and measures of success against this deeper picture of their audience and fine-tune aspects of the program accordingly.

NOTES

¹ Four surveys were completed at a Health Information for Seniors class, which by definition attracted only older adults.

² All names of interviewees have been changed.

³ This tutorial now exists and is located on the web at:
http://www.lib.unc.edu/instruct/community_tutorials/web/

APPENDICES

Appendix I: Descriptions of Community Workshops classes surveyed

The following class descriptions are from the Community Workshops website:
http://www.lib.unc.edu/instruct/community_workshops/classes.html (accessed August 17, 2006).

Computer Basics: Excel (3 Session Workshop)

In this three day workshop, learn how to create, edit, format and save a basic spreadsheet using Microsoft's Excel software. Explore basic formulas, functions and charts.

Computer Basics: Microsoft PowerPoint (3 Session Workshop)

In this three day workshop, learn how to create professional looking presentations using Microsoft's PowerPoint presentation software. We'll show you how to enter text and images, customize templates, and use slide transitions and other techniques to persuade or just dazzle any audience.

Computer Basics: Getting Started with Windows (3 Session Workshop)

Always wanted to learn how to use a computer? Never had the time or the opportunity? Well here's your chance. This workshop provides step-by-step, hands-on instructions in the use of the computer. In this three session workshop, participants will learn about the parts of the computer and the basics of using one including using the mouse, the basics of the Windows Operating System, making and managing folders, and other important computers functions.

Computer Basics: Word (3 Session Workshop)

Haven't typed a letter since your typewriter died? Microsoft Word is a computer program used to create and print text documents that would otherwise be prepared on a typewriter. The key advantage of a word processor is its ability to make changes easily, such as correcting spelling, adding, deleting, and relocating text. Once created, the document can be printed quickly and accurately and saved for later modifications. In this workshop, you will learn the basics of using Microsoft Word.

Gardening Information on the Web

What plants do best in this climate? Where can I find the kind of seeds I want? This workshop will explore information sources on the Web that provide helpful information for Chapel Hill area gardeners.

Health Information for Seniors

This class covers reliable, online health-related resources of particular interest to seniors or those who care for them. The number of health-related Web sites for seniors continues to grow every day. Many sites provide valuable information, while others may have information that is unreliable or misleading. Participants in this class will learn how to find credible sources of health information for seniors as well as how to evaluate health

related Web sites. Additional topics include: disease, injury, wellness, drug and medical information local resources, low-vision resources, and other online resources specifically developed with the needs of older Internet users in mind.

Web Basics: Email (3 Session Workshop)

The first day of this three day workshop, participants will sign up for a free email account. On following days, learn to send and receive email, send and receive attachments, create and manage folders, and avoid spam, scams, and viruses.

Appendix II: In-Class Participant Survey

Community Workshops Participant Survey

1. Before attending this workshop, which statement best describes your experience with computers?

- ☐ I had no experience with computers.
- ☐ I had some computer training in school.
- ☐ I had some computer training outside of school.
- ☐ I taught myself how to do some things on a computer.

2. Do you own a computer?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

3. How long have you been using computers?

4. Where do you use computers (select all that apply)?

- ☐ At home, on a desktop computer
- ☐ At home, on a laptop computer
- ☐ At a relative or friend's house
- ☐ At work
- ☐ At the library
- ☐ Not at all
- ☐ Other: _____

5. How many days last week did you use a computer?

- ☐ None
- ☐ 1-2 days
- ☐ 3-5 days
- ☐ 6-7 days

6. Before attending this class, which of the following have you used (choose all that apply)?

- ☐ Email
- ☐ World Wide Web (Internet)
- ☐ Word Processing (Microsoft Word)
- ☐ Spreadsheets (Microsoft Excel)
- ☐ Photo editing (such as Photoshop)
- ☐ Other: _____

7. Which of the following do you want to know more about (choose all that apply)?

- ☐ Email
- ☐ World Wide Web (Internet)
- ☐ Word Processing (Microsoft Word)
- ☐ Spreadsheets (Microsoft Excel)
- ☐ Photo editing (such as Photoshop)
- ☐ Other: _____

8. What were your goals for this class?

9. Which of the following describe your reasons for attending this class (choose all that apply)?

- ☐ General curiosity about computers and the Internet.
- ☐ Improve computer skills for my job
- ☐ Improve technology skills
- ☐ To help me get a job.
- ☐ For communication purposes.
- ☐ To learn how to use email.
- ☐ To search the Internet for information.
- ☐ To learn how to fix problems with my computer.
- ☐ Other: _____

10. How much did this class help you towards those goals?

- ☐ Not at all
- ☐ Somewhat
- ☐ Pretty well
- ☐ Very well

11. Do you plan to practice the computer skills you learned in this workshop?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

12. How many Community Workshops classes have you attended, including this class?

13. Which of the following best describes you (choose one)?

- ☐ I have a job.
- ☐ I am looking for a job.
- ☐ I have a job but I am looking for a new one.
- ☐ I do not have a job and I am not looking for a job.
- ☐ I am retired.

14. What is your age?

- ☐ Under 18
- ☐ 18-30
- ☐ 31-40
- ☐ 41-50
- ☐ 51-60
- ☐ 61-70
- ☐ above 70

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